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Promoting and rewarding innovations and excellence for revitalizing public administration and service delivery: the United Nations public service awards

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

An effective, efficient, responsive and accountable public service plays an important role in poverty reduction and overall development. There are efforts all over the world to find innovative ways of improving the performance of public administration and to empower it to effectively initiate, plan and implement national development policies and programmes as well as international and regional agreed development strategies, including the Millennium Development Goals. Many Governments have been engaged in the search for effective ways through which public servants may be motivated to search for excellent work methods, approaches and institutional procedures, as well as networking arrangements that are effective in delivering public services. There is, therefore, a great need to support the visibility and transferability of innovations that may be taking place in the public service in various corners of the world and to reward those who engage in successful innovations. The United Nations public service awards were launched as one of the ways through which the United Nations could contribute to the promotion and support of efforts to improve the performance of the public service in Member States.

The awards have been given twice, since June 2003. In June 2005, they will be given for the third time. The present report reviews the background, relevance, purpose, objectives and processes of the awards, as well as that of the awards ceremonies, and makes concrete proposals for further improvement.

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"Today, we recognize those who have progressively opened doors, to make the Public Service more visible. Through their efforts, the citizens of the world are better served; equity is promoted by ensuring access to services, particularly by vulnerable groups; emphasis has been placed on timeliness and courtesy; transparency in decision-making, professionalism and accountability have been forthcoming, to citizens, clients and other stakeholders; methodologies and approaches to work are now a radical departure from 'business as usual', producing good results, lowering costs and enhancing the quality of service; new information and communications technology has been embraced and have improved service delivery; government operations have been re-engineered; and interaction between public officials and the public at all levels of society has been promoted and improved."[1]

I. Background

1. There is consensus in intergovernmental bodies of the United Nations, as well as in other relevant bodies, on the fact that public administration is critical to the development process, including the achievement of internationally agreed goals such as the Millennium Development Goals. The following examples illustrate this:

(a) The Programme of Action adopted by the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, held in Brussels from 14 to 20 May 2001, contains a number of commitments, including one on good governance at national and international levels, that need to be pursued in a sustainable way in order for least developed countries to eradicate poverty. It is emphasized in the Programme of Action that success in meeting the objectives of development and poverty eradication depends, inter alia, on good governance within each country (see A/CONF.191/11);

(b) The Monterrey Consensus specifically points out that good governance at all levels is also essential for sustained economic growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development worldwide and stipulates that it is critical to reinforce national efforts in capacity-building in developing countries and countries with economies in transition in such areas as institutional infrastructure, human resource development, public finance, financial regulation and supervision and public administration;[2]

(c) In the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, world leaders committed themselves to strengthen and improve governance at all levels for the effective implementation of Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals and the Plan of Implementation of the Summit;[3]

(d) In order to develop the capacity of Africa's public institutions, the road map for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals envisages supporting the democracy and governance programmes of the New African Initiative, which includes targeted capacity-building focused on public sector management, administrative and civil service reform and strengthening parliamentary oversight. The road map also targets encouraging Governments to nurture democratic values, ideals and institutions and to develop independent judiciaries and media (see A/56/326);

(e) The Millennium Development Goals do focus us, rightly, on the need to develop partnerships for development. But it is a competent, knowledgeable and experienced public service that helps to provide the policy and a strategic impetus and environment in which actors can play their essential role delivering the Millennium Development Goals and other development strategies to improve the lives of people around the world. In other words, nations need their public services for the achievement of their development goals, including those agreed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration.[1]

2. This consensus on the critical role that governance and public administration play in poverty reduction and development provides further need and impetus to the search for innovative ways of improving the performance of public administration to enable it to support the initiation, planning and implementation of not only national development policies and programmes but also internationally agreed regional and global strategies. However, the search for innovative ways of improving the performance of public administration is not an easy task and poses a number of questions. How can public servants be motivated to engage in the search for new and better work methods, approaches, institutional procedures and networking arrangements to deliver public services? How can the innovations that may be taking place in the public service in various corners of the world be brought to the world's attention and their experience shared to engineer further innovations? How can those who engage in successful innovations be rewarded to motivate them and others to further and sustain innovation and improvement in the public services? Questions such as these motivated the launching of the United Nations public service awards.

II. United Nations public service awards

3. The United Nations public service awards were launched as a result of the deliberations of the fifteenth meeting of the Group of Experts on the United Nations Programme in Public Administration and Finance (see General Assembly resolution 49/136). During this session, the Group of Experts recommended that an annual event be organized by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat through its Division for Public Economics and Public Administration (now the Division for Public Administration and Development Management) to recognize and encourage excellence in public administration. This recommendation was subsequently reflected in the report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Group of Experts on the United Nations Programme in Public Administration and Finance at its fifteenth meeting (E/2000/66) and endorsed by the Economic and Social Council in its decision 2000/231 of 27 July 2000.

III. Purpose and objectives of the awards

4. The overall purpose of the United Nations public service awards as expressed in Council decision 2000/231, is to recognize the institutional contribution made by public servants to enhance the role, professionalism, image and visibility of the public service. This broad purpose needs to be translated into the following more specific objectives:

(a) **To reward service to citizens and motivate public servants worldwide to sustain the momentum of innovation and the improvement of the delivery of public services**. Through the recipients of the United Nations public service awards, whose exemplary efforts to improve the delivery of public services are acknowledged, the United Nations commends public servants for their contribution to achievements in service delivery and to development in particular. It is hoped that in this way they will be encouraged to continue on the path of public service in the interest of the socio-economic development of their countries and to further dedicate their energies to serving the public with responsiveness and dedication;

(b) **To collect and disseminate successful practices and experiences in public administration in order to support efforts for improvements in country level public service delivery**. In order for public administration to be responsive to the needs of the poor and accountable to the population, it needs to innovate its organization, practices and capacities and the way it mobilizes, deploys and utilizes human, material, technological and financial resources, including information, for service delivery. There are successful experiences in various domains of public administration and service delivery in various corners of the world, which if gathered, analysed and disseminated, could inform efforts to strengthen public administration in order to improve the delivery of services at the country level. The United Nations public service awards process is one of the ways of effectively collecting, analysing, assessing and disseminating these successful experiences;

(c) **Through success stories, to counterbalance any negative image of public administration, raise the image and prestige of public servants and revitalize public administration as a noble discipline on which development greatly depends**. Given the acknowledged role that sound, effective, efficient, accountable and responsive public administration plays in the process of development, the United Nations public service awards programme can serve as an effective instrument through which the United Nations can promote public administration as a discipline and a practice. The United Nations public service awards have been leverage to the work of the public service and public servants in the world. The successful cases in public service highlighted by the programme provide evidence that counters the belief that public administration is ineffective, inefficient, and lacking in initiative and innovation, is generally insensitive to development needs, and is in this sense inferior to the private sector, especially with respect to innovation. The public service awards process collects and evaluates what is taking place in the area of innovations in public service around the world. In this sense, it has also become a tool for evaluating the work of the United Nations programme on public administration and development;

(d) **To promote, encourage and facilitate networking among institutions and organizations relevant to public administration and strengthen the networks of the United Nations programme on public administration and development**. Developing the capacity of public administration in the world, especially in developing countries, includes building relevant networks through which experience and successful cases can be exchanged, expertise in the various areas of public administration identified and resources mobilized. The United Nations public service awards and the celebrations of United Nations Public Service Day serve this purpose;

(e) **To enhance professionalism in the public service**. It is expected that rewarding the successful experiences in innovations and excellence in the public service will encourage public servants to approach their work with enhanced professionalism;

(f) **To enhance the visibility and credibility of the United Nations programme on public administration, as well as the image of the work of the Division for Public Administration and Development Management**. The Division for Public Administration and Development Management is mandated to implement the United Nations Programme on Public Administration and Development. The success in executing this mandate depends on several things, including maintaining the visibility and credibility of the work and programmes of the Division. United Nations public service awards contribute to further enhancing the credibility and visibility of the Division's work and thus sustain the momentum and efforts to strengthen public administration capacity in the world.

IV. Categories of the United Nations public service awards

5. For the years 2003 and 2004, the categories of the awards competed for were (a) improvement of public service results, (b) improvement of the quality of the public service process, (c) innovations in public service, and (d) application of information and communication technology in local government.

6. However, for the 2005 awards, the categories have been readjusted to acknowledge (a) improvement of transparency, accountability and responsiveness in public service, (b) improvement of the delivery of services, and (c) application of information and communication technology in government.

7. The readjustment of the categories is a reflection of the thinking process that has been ongoing since the launching of the awards. The focus has been not only on implementing the awards process and ceremony but also on how to make improvements in the awards programme itself. The process of improvement is still ongoing, and there are three options proposed as far as the categories of the awards are concerned. They are the following: (a) to link the award category to the annual major United Nations theme, (b) to select a specific annual theme to be identified with the award, and (c) to leave the categories open-ended for the next two to three years until sufficient experience is gained and the public service awards programme is evaluated. The third option is the one recommended.

V. United Nations public service awards process

8. The process of the United Nations public service awards starts with the announcement of the competition and call for nominations, then continues with receipt of the nominations, analysis of the nomination documents, a pre-selection assessment of the nominations, selection of the winners, verification and announcement of the winners, and ends with the celebration of United Nations Public Service Day and the awards ceremony. As part of the celebrations of the Day, the Division for Public Administration and Development Management organizes a discussion panel during which the winners of the awards make presentations of their experiences, which are then discussed by invited experts. Finally, all the winning

experiences are compiled, analysed and published in a compendium of successful or "best" practices in public administration.

A. Call for nominations

9. The nomination process includes the call for nominations, dissemination of the nomination form and other necessary documents. The current process of calling for nominations involves posting the relevant documents for nomination on the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) web site, sending them to permanent missions to the United Nations, government ministries or other government agencies in charge of public service in Member States, institutional partners of the Division for Public Administration and Development Management, United Nations Development Programme country offices, UNPAN regional centres and the regional commissions.

10. In order to reach a larger audience and receive a wider response, it is proposed that the following be included in the process of calling for nominations: distributing information about the United Nations public service awards during all Department of Economic and Social Affairs events (meetings, seminars, workshops, conferences etc.), publicizing the call for nominations on United Nations Radio and publicizing the awards through radio stations, television, newspapers and journals at the national level. The objective should be to collect as much material as possible concerning innovative practices in the public sector.

B. Nominees

11. Public sector organizations and agencies, as well as public and private partnerships and organizations performing outsourced public service functions, have been hitherto eligible for nomination for the United Nations public service awards as long as they are not self-nominated. Nomination packages may be received from government departments and agencies, universities, national schools, public administration institutions, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, public and private partnerships and organizations performing outsourced public service functions.

12. However, during the recently concluded review of the public service awards, two clear options stood out. On the one hand, it was observed that when the award rewards excellence in the delivery of services, it is possible to reward a private enterprise in which an outsourcing arrangement excels in the delivery of service. On the other hand, this case would not serve the purpose of uplifting the image, visibility, credibility and prestige of public administration. Therefore, if the award is aimed strictly at rewarding the performance of public sector institutions, private sector and civil society institutions would not be eligible for nomination. For the purposes of revitalizing the public service as a discipline, an organization, a practice and a profession, it would be more appropriate for the United Nations public service awards to reward innovations and excellence exhibited only by institutions in the public sector.

C. References and supporting documents

13. The current guidelines for nominations and supporting documents provide that nominations should include a cover letter, background information about the nominated organization, a completed nomination form, including supporting documents (e.g., evaluation and audit reports and results of client surveys) and a maximum of five letters of reference. The guidelines also state that letters of reference should describe the excellence and uniqueness of the initiatives undertaken and, if possible, elaborate on the collaboration between the referee and the nominated organization. The guidelines specify that since the nomination itself already describes the work performed by the nominated organization, letters of reference should instead focus on the benefits derived from the initiatives.

14. With respect to references and supporting documents, the United Nations public service awards process has been encountering problems. Some nominations have been accompanied by many supporting documents, which impose too great a burden on the processing and evaluation process, and some nominations, references and supporting documents have not been submitted in United Nations working languages, which makes it in most cases impossible to translate them. Voluminous documentation in a multiplicity of languages has been unhelpful. The process needs to emphasize that less voluminous but better organized documentation in one of the six official languages of the United Nations would facilitate understanding of the substance of the nominations. The following would therefore make the process more manageable: only five letters of reference and only three supporting documents should be submitted; the nominating institutions should validate the primary supporting documents; and nominations and supporting documents should be submitted only in one of the official languages of the United Nations.

D. Criteria for selection

15. In the table below, the selection criteria applied are correlated with each award category as they have been given since the launch of the awards.

Category of award	*Criteria*
2003 and 2004	
Award for the improvement of public service results	To qualify for an award in this category, a nominee must demonstrate the capacity to: (a) Respond constantly to the needs of citizens; (b) Promote equity (by ensuring that weak and vulnerable groups have access to basic services); (c) Deliver public services in a manner emphasizing timeliness, courtesy and access.

Category of award	*Criteria*
Award for the improvement of the quality of the public service process	The attributes that are likely to enhance the chances of nominees under this category include those indicating evidence that the nominees consistently take measures to: (a) Promote transparency in decision-making; (b) Promote accountability to citizens, clients and other stakeholders; (c) Promote professionalism (in the areas of human resource/ personnel management, public service ethics and management decision-making).
Award for innovations in public service	To qualify as "innovations", the measures cited in support of nominations must demonstrate clearly that they: (a) Represent a "radical departure" from business as usual; (b) Produce results beneficial to citizens, clients and other stakeholders (as demonstrated in beneficiary surveys or benchmarking studies); (c) Effectively reduce the cost of service delivery while maintaining/enhancing service quality.
Award for application of information and communication technology in local government (local e-government)	Awards under this category target measures that apply ICT solutions to local-level problems, and in the process: (a) Enhance service delivery capacity and quality; (b) Re-engineer government operations; (c) Foster e-participation (i.e., promote interaction between public officials and the public).
2005	
Award for improving transparency, accountability and responsiveness in the public service	The nominee: (a) **Promotes equity**: extends government service delivery to vulnerable groups and/or enabling service delivery to a wider population; (b) **Promotes transparency and accountability**: increases the public's ability to observe, monitor and analyse government decision-making and processes; (c) **Promotes professionalism**: adequately addresses human resources management issues, such as recruitment, training and development based on merit and the promotion of ethical conduct; (d) **Represents a "radical departure" in design**: transformative changes within a large framework, rather

Category of award	*Criteria*
	than incremental improvements, in the context of a given country and region; (e) **Has introduced a substantially new concept**: represents, in the context of a given country and/or region, the introduction of a unique idea or distinctively new approach to problem solving; (f) **Has produced qualitative and/or quantitative improvements**.
Award for improving the delivery of services	The nominee: (a) **Demonstrates effectiveness in meeting the stated goals and objectives quantitatively and qualitatively**; (b) **Provides high quality service delivery**: timeliness, courtesy, access and client-orientation in public service delivery; (c) **Achieves efficiency in the process of public service delivery**: specifically addresses effective uses of strategies such as streamlining of processes, reduction of red tape, coordination and other measures; (d) **Represents a "radical departure" in design**: makes transformative changes within a large framework, rather than incremental improvements, in the context of a given country and region; (e) **Has introduced a substantially new concept**: represents, in the context of a given country and/or region, the introduction of a unique idea or distinctively new approach to problem solution; (f) **Has produced qualitative and/or quantitative improvements**.
Award for application of information and communication technology in government	(a) **Enhanced service delivery**: both local and central governments have improved their service delivery due to the application of information and communication technology; (b) **Re-engineered government operations**: the implementation of processes re-engineering and innovative government applications; (c) **e-participation**: the applications of e-government that enable government policy makers and public officials to better interact with the public, particularly individual citizens.

16. It is proposed that the criteria for selecting the winning nominations be generalized as the following: (a) creativity, as judged from the uniqueness of the

concept applied; (b) effectiveness, as judged from the extent to which the innovation achieves specific goals and objectives; (c) tangible results achieved, as judged from the quantitative and qualitative improvements from the innovation; (d) citizen-centred service, as judged not only from the benefits the citizens obtain from the innovation but also from the way they are associated to the initiation, implementation and evaluation of the innovation; (e) transferability and adaptability of the innovation to other regions, countries, institutions etc.; (f) sustainability, as judged from the length of the period of application of the innovation; (g) innovative partnerships, as judged from the way the innovation has facilitated partnerships with various sectors and the communities served; (h) knowledge networking, as judged from the way the innovation has created knowledge and facilitated the sharing of its approaches and methodology among other institutions, including academic institutions, such as universities, schools and institutes of public administration; (i) equity, as judged from the extent to which the benefits of the innovation are spread, especially to vulnerable groups, such as women, children, disabled persons, etc.; (j) transparency, as judged from the way the innovation has opened communication and sharing of information, as well as openness of public administration systems to public scrutiny; and (k) accountability. It is imperative for the improvement of the selection of winners that indicators for each of these criteria be made more precise to facilitate the assessment and selection process and make it more objective.

E. Modalities for selection

17. The current modalities for selection include the following tasks:

- Designing an evaluation form for each category of the award
- Making an initial review of the forms and accompanying documents for each nomination to ensure completeness of the nomination and supporting materials
- Pre-screening of each nomination by at least two or more experts in the Division for Public Administration and Development Management
- Establishing a short list of nominations based on this pre-screening
- Establishing a subcommittee of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration to conduct the final selection and submit the selected award winners to the committee for endorsement
- Verification and validation to ascertain congruence between the nomination documents and the reality on the ground
- Submission of recommendations to the Secretary-General for declaration of the winners
- Final announcement of the winners of the awards.

18. This modality has been followed twice so far, and from both observation and the recent review, the following should be done to further improve the process: (a) allocating more staff time to the awards process, including hiring consultants to support the pre-screening, which is cumbersome because of the volume of documents to be read, (b) allocating more time for the subcommittee of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration to make the final evaluation and

select the winners, and (c) making site visits to the winning nominations to make the process of verification and validation of the exactness of the claims presented in the nomination forms and accompanying documents more effective.

19. Another proposal aimed at easing the process of assessing the nominations, especially if the number of nominees continues to grow, is to institute a two-step nomination process, whereby nominators are first requested to submit a one- or two-page nomination document giving a general description of the initiative/project/service/institution being nominated, as well as the merits of its achievements. The second step would then involve making a more detailed submission only for those initiatives/projects/services/institutions considered eligible in the first step. This would reduce the volume of supporting documents that need to be read and analysed during the preselection process.

VI. United Nations public service awards ceremonies

20. The United Nations public service awards ceremony has been held on the past two occasions on 23 June, which is United Nations Public Service Day. All the winners are always invited to attend and receive their awards. During the session in which when the winners receive their awards, each makes a brief presentation on the winning initiative. During the ceremony on 23 June 2004, the Division for Public Administration and Development Management organized a videoconference, during which messages from Italy, Morocco, Qatar, Republic of Korea and South Africa were received. This videoconference projected the image of the public service awards as a mechanism of exchange of successful experiences. It is proposed that this practice be sustained and improved, with more countries participating. This would further increase the visibility of the awards. Furthermore, the prestige and visibility of the awards would be enhanced through the following: (a) ensuring that the United Nations Secretary-General personally participates in the celebration of United Nations Public Service Day and public service awards ceremonies; (b) participation of luminaries, such as Nobel Prize winners and high-level, internationally well known personalities in governance and public administration, as keynote speakers at the ceremonies; (c) expanding the guest list for the ceremonies; (d) holding a gala affair as part of the ceremony; and (e) encouraging all Member States to engage in activities that promote innovations and excellence in public service to mark United Nations Public Service Day at the national level.

21. Moreover, the value of the award itself needs to be improved by: (a) inviting the winners of the awards to participate in an activity of the Division for Public Administration and Development Management, such as an expert group meeting or a training workshop, to present their experiences; and (b) improving and standardizing the design of the awards to have a more tangible, attractive and permanent award (the first award, in 2003, was a certificate, and the second, in 2004, was a certificate accompanied by a crystal trophy). The process of upgrading the award should continue until there is a more attractive symbol that does not change with the years. Countries that have the facilities should be encouraged to participate in the ceremony via videoconferencing.

VII. Dissemination and follow-up

22. The further success of the United Nations public service awards programme will depend, among other things, on the dissemination of the innovations that received the award. The following measures could strengthen the dissemination: (a) the Department of Economic and Social Affairs should invite winners to attend meetings/conferences that it organizes to share their winning experiences; (b) the United Nations public service awards should be a regular agenda item at meetings of the Committee of Experts on Public Administration so as to ensure timely updates and inputs from Committee members; (c) the full Division of Public Administration and Development Management should conduct long-term impact evaluation of the innovations or programmes that received the awards, especially of the impact on customers/clients served, as well as in terms of transferability within or outside the same country; and (d) the Division of Public Administration and Development Management should periodically publish a compendium of award-winning experiences and disseminate it among Governments, universities, and management development institutes to inspire innovations in governance and public administration.

VIII. Funding

23. A programme such as the United Nations public service awards programme and the improvements that are proposed in the present report require a substantial amount of funds in order for them to be implemented effectively. The Division for Public Administration and Development Management needs to develop a comprehensive resource mobilization strategy. The Division will need to explore partnership and sponsorship possibilities for funding in this respect with the private sector. In addition, specific provisions should be included in the regular budget of the Division to support the public service awards. Another avenue to be explored is the establishment of a trust fund with the support of bilateral and multilateral donors who have seen and are convinced of the value of the United Nations public service awards.

IX. Conclusion

24. **Improvements in the delivery of public services contribute greatly to good governance for the achievement of international development goals. The United Nations public service awards programme is very important in inspiring public servants all over the world to work towards perfecting their approaches, methodologies, practices, systems and processes, as well as in delivering public services focusing on results and responsiveness to the people they serve. Coupled with the United Nations Public Service Day celebrations, the awards programme enhances the visibility and transferability of innovations, as well as opportunities for sharing experience in the improvement of public service performance. Therefore, the United Nations Secretariat, as well as Member States, should further increase the efforts and resources that are devoted to ensuring that the United Nations public service awards programme not only remains successful but also further improves and becomes increasingly valued**

by all countries as an instrument for acknowledging the achievements of public servants and encouraging them in their quest for diligent service to the public.

Notes

[1] Address by the President of the General Assembly, Julian R. Hunte, on the occasion of the United Nations Public Service Day ceremony at United Nations Headquarters, 23 June 2004 (see www.unpan.org).

[2] See *Report of the International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.02.II.A.7), chap. I, resolution 1, annex.

[3] See *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigenda), chap. I, resolution 2, annex.